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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to extend Gage Chapel's application of Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad to the persuasive aspects of television programs and to examine its relevance to television criticism. The five concepts underlying a Burkeian analysis are discussed: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose, and the elements within Burke's dramatistic pentad are defined for application to dramatic television productions. The last section of this document concerns the application of the pentad to a production of the television series M*A*S*H. It is concluded that Burke's pentad as applied to television provides the critic with a beginning structure and a general system of understanding the improtance of the various components. The pentad is a conceptual organizing tool to be used to mold the substance of thought the critic brings to the critical experience. (TS)

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THE BURKEIAN PENTAD AS DEFINED FOR TELEVISION CRITICISM

Submitted
to the Western States Speech Communication Association, Mass Communication Division for presentation at November, 1975, Convention

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Nearly every journal article and convention paper on television criticism begins with reference to the great void of critical analysis in our field... to the fact that Kreiling (7) and Steinberg (8) have explicitly shown that few "critics" exist within our discipline leaving a host of reporters and reviewers to function as guideposts. We all are aware and have been aware of this void for some time. The next step seems to seriously consider what to do about it.

Excluding psychological analyses of children's programs, the majority of broadcast academicians seemed to have made the decision to avoid critical treatises of television programming. A justification commonly given for this avoidance is that scholarly criticism (if a great body did exist) could have little, if any, influence on broadcasters' programming decisions. This is the hackneyed argument that sponsors and ratings call the shots. Even though this argument may reflect a very real situation, from one perspective it is meaningless.

Criticism of all disciplines has traditionally focused upon the explanation of a phenomena or a work of art. Literary criticism functions to describe the strategies authors have developed within their writing. The critic's intentional function is not to tell authors how to utilize various strategies, but rather is to present explanations of the critic's interpretation of what persuasive strategies authors did use and with what degree of skill.

Presumably explanation augments one's understanding, hence one's interest and appreciation of the work. The point is that careful explanation is enough. Criticism is an important entity regardless of subsequent influence it may have upon future authors or television programmers. If our television critism does eventually serve the additional function of establishing high standards of quality and taste, then we have an important service entrusted to us. Yet it should be clear that our primary concern as critics is to explain, describe, interpret, and evaluate the conscious or unconscious strategies developed within a work.

Perhaps partly because of our void in television criticism, beginning television critics may be hard-pressed to find critical models to help them focus on strategic elements contributing to a program's rhetorical impact. In Western's spring journal, Gage Chapel (6) makes an important contribution to television criticism by outlining Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad. Chapel applies the pentad to explore the persuasive aspects of television programs. He clearly states that the rhetorical perspective he uses is a conceptual approach focusing on the analysis and evaluation of the persuasive massage both berbal and non-verbal. (6, p. 81) Chapel's Burkeian application really does not include evaluative statements, but his point that analyses of television's persuasive strategies warrant serious study is a point which in itself deserves serious academic attention.

The purpose of this paper is to extend Chapel's application, and to some extent redefine the Burkeian approach in hopes of making its relevance to television criticism more clear. First, the concepts underlying a Burkeian analysis will be laid out; secondly, the elements within Burke's dramatistic pentad will be defined for application to dramatic television productions, and finally the pentad will be applied to a production of the television series M*A*S*H.

Many of us understand that Burke's dramatistic pentad includes five major elements.

> Act - Names what took place.
> Scene - Is the situation or background for the act.
> Agent - The person who performed the act.
> Agency - The instruments the agent used to perform the act.
> Purpose - Reason for performing the act.
>
> (2, xvii)

Burke developed the dramatistic pentad as a tool for explaining how a writer or speaker perceives the world or some aspect of it. Burke is concerned with the examination of motives through analysis of an individual's rhetoric and argues that whenever a person describes a situation, the person orders these five elements to reflect his/her perspective of that situation. (2, xviii-xiv) Brock synthesizes the use of the pentad for us.

> Thus, beginning with the language of the stage, the pentad, it is possible to examine a speaker's discourse to determine what view of the world he would have an audience accept. One may then make a judgement as to both the appropriateness and adequacy of the description the speaker has presented.
>
> (1,330)

The critic uses these five basic elements in any way he/she discerns to explain the motives of a creator as expressed through the

rhetorical strategies the creator implemented within a work. The pentad is not used as a model but rather as a set of tools with which models for analyses can be built. The tools are elements which work together to create the impact or the final rhetorical statement. Viewing the elements in isolation cannot explain the total impact of the work; consequently, Burke introduces a study of ratios among the pentadic components.

The various combination of ratios provides a focus for the critic and a vocabulary for discussing important aspects of the work. Although describing relationships among the elements helps structure the analysis into a manageable form, a study of ratios among the elements yields yet a segmented explanation of the work. The function of each ratio must be argued in terms of its impact on the total work. Explaining that certain relationships exist within a work does not by itself say much about the rhetorical gestalt of the work. The importance of any study of a pentadic ratio must be argued in relation to other ratios of relevance contribting to the rhetorical impact.

Burke's pentad can be analogized with a human hand, the fingers representing the place where all elements meet or from where all elements originate and to which all elements are bound. Let the palm signify the entire impact of the rhetorical act. Just like fingers on a hand, the pentadic factors work together to perform most functions. In addition, Burke cautions critics not to attribute to some element or pentadic relationship the function of causing the rhetorical impact, or to carry the analogy further, causing the hand

to function. If such cause is attributed, Burke believes we enter into an important methodological dilemma. He states:

> The procedure would be somewhat like that of a man who, noting that lungs, heart, kidneys, liver, and stomach all function together, attempted to decide which of these organs is the cause of the others.

Burke's insistence on a relatively holistic approach is paramount in any analysis which attempt to follow a Burkeian approach.

In applying the pentad to an analysis of a television program, I suggest that several adaptations be made. Act and scene seem to hold constant because they retain their functions of describing the contextual situation and the action which occurs within the setting. But agent, agency, and purpose warrant definitions which reflect the uniqueness of the television medium.

Television is designed primarily for entertainment value, most often carefully contrived to follow a dramatistic formula with planned moments of conflict and resolution. Normally in a television production no one individual is responsible for the creative work, as generally is the case in literature and the fine arts. The responsible agent in television is a quadratic blending among persons who function as 1) a producer, 2) a writer, 3) a director, and often times 4) an editor. Television is a medium which usually necessitates the blending of various craftmen's skills in the creation of the act. The producer, writer, director, and final editor fuse to function as the agent, an off-camera component.

Although television Burkeian critics would most likely not identify the off-camera creative quadratic as the primary agent,* a Burkeian literary critic would. If a literary critic were to study Faulkner's novel Light in August, the critic would focus on the rhetorical strategies developed by Faulkner, the agent, rather than the strategies and purpose used by the novel's primary character, Christian. Walter Cronkite on the "CBS Evening News" functions in much the same manner as Christian in Light in August. Cronkite is not speaking for himself but rather for the producers, directors, and writers of the newscast who make the decisions on what stories are to be reported and in what manner. The production is created by the producers and directors manipulating production elements and on-air talent. Cronkite is manipulated by agent just as actor Carroll O'Connor is when playing Archie Bunker. Producer Norman Lear has defined the parameters of Archie's character for the writer(s) who creates the specific situations and words for O'Connor to interpret. The director and editor create actual visual product in post-production by choosing taped segments which most effectively express the quadratic's intended message.

With the rejection of the on-the-scene actors as agents, the actors are categorized under agency. Actors are one important set of instruments the creative quadratic manipulates to help create the rhetorical statement. It is important for the critic to view all the principal actors as interpreting characters carefully designed perhaps primarily by writers in relation to all other characters. Archie Bunker by himself does not contribute nearly as much to the rhetorical statement as does the interaction among the principals including arch-conservative Archie, his feather-brained

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* See Chapel's article (6) in which he identifies all the leading characters in a number of situation comedies as the agents.

yet compassionate wife, Edith, his daughter Gloria and her husband, Mike, a self-avowed liberal. Each episode seems to ask the audience to accept a combination of values derived from all the primary characters' value systems... value systems which are often diametrically opposed.

All the technical elements of the television production are another important facet under agency. A prime example of interaction between the manipulation of production elements and plot, occurred in the final M*A*S*H episode in which McLean Stevenson played Col. Henry Blake. The entire plot was devoted to Henry's preparation to leave Korea and return to the States. In the last minute of the episode Blake is given a rousing send-off by camp personnel while he boards a helicopter. The next scene is the camp surgical center. In walks Blake's devoted aid, Radar, in tears to stoically announce the Col.'s chopper has been shot down and Henry killed. Quick close-up shots are taken of the principals, and just as quickly the camer zooms out to a wide shot of the surgical center at which point the shot is frozen and all sound cut. The absence of sound and frozen camera shot continue for five long seconds. These seconds of stillness clearly impact on the director's purpose of relating the devastating personal tragedies of war.

The final element within the pentad, purpose, is in reference to the creative quadratic, not the actors. The actors are vehicles for the agent's statement, so that it is the quadratic's purpose which is of ultimate importance in the analysis. In fact the relationship between agent and purpose is central in nearly all television analyses.

Continuing with the "hand" analogy, the purpose and agent relationship in a television production is similar to that of an index finger and thumb. These two appendages are primary instruments in the manipulation of the hand, just as the purpose and agent are often controlling forces within the production.

It is clear, however, that the thumb stands apart from all the fingers and is the only appendage which can easily function in relation to every finger. The same relationship exists between the agent in a television production and each of the other pentadic elements. In short, the agent and purpose form the most natural relationship for study, yet by itself that ratio or any ratio certainly cannot explain the production's impact. Because the agent is usually in control of the creative experience, ratios designed to study the relationships between agent/scene, agent/agency, and agent/act are also natural focal points of study. Yet in the final analysis, the ratios the critic chooses to study are generated by the particular work under scrutiny.

An application of the pentad as defined for television criticism should elucidate the value of a Burkeian approach. To reiterate, the factors of the pentad along with their definitions are as follows:

Agent - Quadiatic blending of producer, writer, director, and editor.
Purpose - Quadratic's intended statement.
Agency - Actors and production elements used to make statement.
Scene - The background situation of the act.
Act - Names what took place.

The dramatic television program to be critiqued is the only episode of M*A*S*H which takes place entirely in the operating theater and which is void of a laugh track. In this program the agent's <u>purpose</u> of dramatizing

the human suffering resulting from battel fields of war is the single most important element. The purpose of this episode is a serious and successful attempt to specifically demonstrate the senselessness of sending men to battle to kill or be killed or wounded. The mangled bodies of the wounded or near dead are subsequently returned to their camps' surgeons who work frantically to preserve the men's lives. The futility of the medical personnel in a war camp who are literally trying to patch up the effects of war is the purpose of this production.

The scene interacts significantly with the agent's purpose. The entire program, excluding several minutes, is shot inside the surgical building of a Korean War medical camp. The other two minutes are shot immediately outside the door. The nearly one room location for an entire television production produced without the presence of a studio audience creates a smothering effect. The audience might naturally wonder, "When do we get out of this stinking room?" To which the agent might respond, "Not until the bodies maimed from this war are patched!" The purpose/scene ratio is thus important in explaining the program's rhetorical impact.

The act in terms of plot, does not assume significance in itself, but is of prime importance in relation to the characters as part of agency. In fact the act/agency ratio in this production is central to interpreting the rhetorical effect. The action is nearly totally devoted to surgical operations. While operations are being performed, attention is focussed on individual problems occurring to various characters.

One of the first problems to be exposed is Col. Henry Blake's developing case of arthritis which Hawkeye believes is affecting Henry's surgery. Next Radar becomes dizzy and pale from having two quarts of blood siphoned from his body. The action quickly moves back to Hawkeye who is performing an open-heart massage on a soldier. The scene shifts to the outer blood room where Frank is in confessional with Trapper. Frank discloses that he has always been a compulsive "snitch" or tattle-tale. Frank regrets this behavior but asks Trapper to be his friend anyway. The action races back to the surgery room where more soldiers are being carried in. Dr. Sidney Freedman, a psychiatrist, enters and is thrown a white coat, surgical mask and gloves. He has not practiced medicine in perhaps eight or ten years, but any medical assistance is badly needed. As Hawkeye is reorienting Sidney to the human anatomy, Hawkeye is told the soldier on whom he performed an open-heart massage died. Trapper takes center stage as he discovers the surgical hut is on fire and puts it our. (A much appreciated commercial break is taken at this time.)

After the commercial, the final scene shows the last nurses exiting wearily from the surgical room. The room is empty and we hear the end of Radar's news report piped through the camp's PA system: "Armed Forces Radio reports that General Mark N. Clark has just been appointed commander of the UN forces in Korea. General Clark news, generally speaking. No one succeeding us at all." This closing monologue, although cloaked in humor, is clearly a serious statement of general purpose, perhaps unnecessary due to the inherent strength of the act/agency ratio.

The manner in which the individual characters cope with the onslaught of disasters forms a strategic shell which capsules the agent's purpose. The purpose is strategically articulated through this act/agency ratio. The primary M*A*S*H characters, excluding Frank and sometimes Hotlips, have the ability to laugh at themselves, the situation and at others. Although this episode has extraordinarily few gag lines, the comic relief moments which do exist are placed strategically to lighten the heavy statement the agent is asking the audience to accept. A good comic relief example occurs when Henry asks Radar to get his sewint thread to be used for sutures. (Besides running out of blood, hot water, and surgical masks and gowns, they have run out of silk suture thread.) Hotlips hears the Col.'s request and exclaims, "Col., ordinary sewing thread?" To which Henry responds, "It's either that or the stapler in may office, Major."

In this episode the characters cannot be separated from the act. If Ben Casey type characters were substituted, the entire impact would be changed, in fact the traumas caused by all the disasters would be unbearable. The rhetorical effect of the substitution might be perceived as a didactic, left-wing statement of the miseries of war too horrible for the human mind to conceive.

The technical elements, the other aspect of agency, do not seem to be of major concern in this particular production, but nevertheless a contributing factor. The staging is natural, there are appropriate close-ups of actors for reactions to personal traumas, and the effect

of the final shot of an empty surgical room with an audio newscast is a shock after constant exposure to people packed like sausages in that same room.

In any Burkeian analysis regardless of medium under study, agent, purpose, scene, agency, and act work together in perhaps differing proportions to make a program's rhetorical statement. Each ratio which is studied is done so to explain the rhetorical statement, or the gestalt the program creates. An act/agency ratio may appear to be of primary importance, not by itself, but in relation to the agent, the agent's purpose and perhaps the scene.

No magical formula exists for a Burkeian critic, but then none exists for a director, writer or a producer in the production of a television program of artistic countenance. However, mundane program formulas void of artistic magic do exist and do little to excite the senses and the intellect. These hackneyed formula productions are not artistic because they fail to order, clarify, intensify, and interpret a certain aspect of the human condition. (11,3) According to 20th century philosopher, Irwin Edman,"...art is the name for that whole process of intelligence by which life, understanding its own conditions, turns them into the most interesting or exquistie account." (7,12)

Analysis of formula programs such as most soap operas, many early 1960 Westerns and more recent police/detective programs perhaps belong to the reviewers' domain rather than the critics'. Yet when television does produce glimmering artistic statements our field needs to be prepared to elucidate the process by which the piece was produced. Thus far

unstated, yet assummed, is that prospective critics have complete knowledge of television aesthetics (10) so the critic can draw on command from his/her knowledge of television production, techniques and strategies contributing to a particular program's impact.

Burke's pentad as applied to television provides the critic with a beginning structure, a general system of understanding the importance of the various components. It is a conceptual organizing tool to be used to mold the substance of thought the critic brings to the critical experience. This paper serves as a brief example of how Burke's pentadic tool can be implemented to assist the critic in describing the intrinsic value and rhetorical impact of a television program of artistic merit.

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